

Sudden Unexpected Infant Deaths

Sudden Unexpected Infant Death (SUID) is the leading cause of death of infants between the first month and first year of life. Between 30 and 50 infants die suddenly and unexpectedly in Massachusetts each year – the equivalent of the loss of two classrooms of kindergarten students. SUID impacts Hispanic and black infants at higher rates than white infants in the Commonwealth.ⁱ Understanding why infants die unexpectedly requires careful scene investigation and data collection by law enforcement agencies, medical examiners, and public health officials. In Massachusetts, the Center for Sudden Infant Death at Boston Medical Center and the Child Fatality Review Program are important resources for this work.

The relationship between SUID and unsafe sleep environments is well established. Multidisciplinary reviews of these deaths, conducted by local child fatality review teams, have found that many are associated with unsafe infant sleep positions and sleep environments, such as bed-sharing, couches, and prone or side-lying positions. The understanding of SUID is evolving on the national level as well as in Massachusetts. In 2011 the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) expanded its recommendations concerning safe sleep practices for infants. In 2012 DPH issued “Policy Recommendations for Safe Infant Sleep Practices,” based on the AAP recommendations. These policy recommendations were endorsed by the State Child Fatality Review Team and the OCA. DPH has identified safe sleep as a priority area in its Injury Prevention Strategic Plan and convenes the Safe Sleep Task Force.

In the summer of 2014 EOHHS convened an interagency Task Force on Infant Safe Sleep to educate the public, parents, and caregivers about infant safe sleep practices. The task force forged collaborations across state agencies and with medical associations and hospitals to reduce the risks associated with unsafe infant sleep practices. Governor Patrick proclaimed October 2014 to be Infant Sleep Awareness Month. Throughout the month of October, the Task Force on Infant Safe Sleep conducted a campaign to educate the public about the importance of infant safe sleep practices through its Mass.gov/SafeSleepⁱⁱ website and awareness advertising. The Task Force provided a board book promoting safe sleep for every baby born in October. These board books will also be distributed through the Reach Out and Read program and by DCF in its Welcome Baby bags for parents with infants, along with other safe sleep materials. Information for physicians was shared through the Massachusetts Chapter of the AAP and the Massachusetts Hospital Association.

Recommendation: Our goal is for every parent of every newborn to hear the safe sleep message during pregnancy, at birth, and at doctor visits. The Child Advocate encourages all state organizations to offer clear and consistent information to the public about safe sleep practices for infants.

ⁱ Five year (2007-2011) average annual SUID rates among MA Black non-Hispanic and Hispanic infants are 2.6 and 1.6 times, respectively, that of White non-Hispanic infants. (Source: Registry of Vital Records and Statistics, Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Data prepared by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.)

ⁱⁱ <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dph/programs/community-health/dvip/injury-prevention/infant-safe-sleep.html>